

TREASURE HUNTING

Spend an autumn weekend sifting through the vintage castoffs at legendary local indoor-outdoor antiques markets

By **Caroline Tiger**

Photographs by **Ed Cunicelli**



IT'S 10 A.M. ON A SATURDAY and the parking lot next to Renningers Market's sprawling wooden structure in Kutztown is already filled. Attendants are waving the steady stream of arriving cars into an adjacent field. This is one of the flea market's three annual "extravaganza weekends," when, from Thursday through Saturday, some 1,000 vendors set up shop in the surrounding fields and under two covered pavilions, adding to the 250 vendors whose inside booths are open every weekend.

The parked cars' license plates show just how far people will come for these fabled events—from Illinois, New York, Maryland,

MARKET VALUE
Shoppers find some salvageable picture frames among the wares at the Golden Nugget Antique Market in Lambertville.



ODDS AND ENDS
Vintage toy trucks and cars park on one vendor's table, top, while rugs and tapestries unroll on another, above.

Massachusetts, Virginia, Renningers is a well-known antiques-market destination, thanks to mentions in far-reaching publications like *Martha Stewart Living*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*. The crowd browsing the stalls is a mix of locals, antiques dealers, experienced pickers, young urbanites and suburban couples looking to furnish their starter homes, and people like my friend and me, here for the atmosphere, to marvel at the sheer volume of stuff.

Going to an antiques market without a goal in mind is like going to a supermarket when you're hungry: You'll want to buy everything in sight. At this moment, I wish I had a house with soaring ceilings

FLEA-MARKETING TIPS FROM THE PROS



DAVID RAGO

Owner, David Rago Auctions, Lambertville

What he collects: American art ceramics and turn-of-the-century decorative objects and furniture.

Where he shops: "I cut my teeth at the Lambertville [Antique] Market. I started going there when I was 16 and continued to go for the next 10-12 years," he says. "When I was a college student, I lived for it."

Advice: "Dress like you have money—this way, the dealers will show you the good stuff. Bring a magnifying glass. Find out what time the flea opens, and get there an hour beforehand. The really hard-core are out there shopping before dawn by lantern light. By 8 or 9 a.m., it's over—all of the good stuff has been snapped up."

To haggle or not to haggle: If you're going to haggle, do your homework first. People are attracted to flea markets for their easy-money cachet, but if you go just for fun with no goal in mind and aim to get a bargain, you'll end up with junk. Even if it's expensive, there's a better chance of getting a good buy because it's a flea market. "For me, it's about getting the \$10,000 piece that I can sell for \$12,000."

Best find: In 1975, at the Lambertville market, "I found a piece of decorated Marblehead pottery with a geometric two-color design that today would be worth about \$20,000. I bought it for \$125."



MARY ANN CARDELLINO

Owner, Blendo, a gift shop on Philadelphia's Antique Row that carries a hodgepodge of vintage and new items

What she collects: Everything from clothes and accessories to linens, furniture, books and frames—the scope is reflected by the granny's-attic atmosphere of her jam-packed store. "I find that older things are often designed and made better," she says. "I look for good style and design."

Where she shops: The Fairmount Flea Market that winds around the Eastern State Penitentiary twice a year, as well as house sales and auctions. She'll occasionally take a day trip out to Adamstown.

Advice: "Try to have small bills and large bills—if you negotiate a price, you don't want to pull out a \$20." And bring a car that can carry a big load.

To haggle or not to haggle: "There's no harm in asking—decide whether it's worth it or not. Value's a relative thing. Life's about negotiating, so why not negotiate at a flea market?"

Best find: A pair of large primitive vases at a market in London. "We trash-picked packing material so we could carry them with us. That started my collection of what I now know to be Gouda pottery. It's the only [specific] thing I collect. I have 30 pieces, and I would never get rid of those first two."



M.E. STER

Owner, ME & Blue, a new and vintage clothing and accessories boutique in Philadelphia's Old City

What she collects: Vintage clothes and accessories; funky fabrics for her store's new line of A-line skirts; and fur collars to refurbish.

Where she shops: "I get out of town," says Ster. "I should have a bumper sticker that says, 'I brake for thrift stores.'" And the smaller the town, the better. "There's less competition in the boonies for what I'm looking for." The only exception to small-town thrifting: Montreuil, a flea market in Paris, is Ster's favorite place for vintage finds.

Advice: Know what you're looking for. "I have a game plan," she says. For example, she's been looking for tweed and plaid vintage coats to stock the store this fall and winter. Also, she wears layers so she can try on clothes. "I usually do two once-overs," she says. "I check pockets for holes, and lining for rips."

To haggle or not to haggle: She doesn't believe in it. "For the most part, you're already getting an amazing deal."

Best find: A needlepoint baguette purse with two cats on it, in amazing condition.



GIRL TIME
Feminine personalities will be drawn to a dainty display of crocheted doilies, handkerchiefs and framed art, *below*.



SWAP STOP
Shoppers can browse to their hearts' content among vases and pottery, *above*, and piles of old flatware, *below*.



where I could use an 8-foot-tall hutch painted robin's-egg blue (\$250). The dealers must be in on the demand for shabby chic, because the vendor with the hutch also has a few narrow wooden pantry cabinets painted pale pink and white (\$80). Open the pantry and hutch doors and you'll find dust and dirt from the farmhouses they once furnished.

A neighboring dealer shows a stack of bamboo steamer trunks, and more farmhouse furniture is on display up ahead, including pie safes and a squat yellow butter churner.

With no house to furnish—just a rented one-bedroom apartment in Center City that is already plenty packed with odds and ends—I pay more attention to the smaller merchandise. A jewelry dealer has heaps of colorful bangles and rhinestone flower brooches in glass display cases. I pluck a bracelet from an open case—it's black with sterling and marcasite details. The dealer tells me it's black jade, which is why it costs \$85. She also has delicate jeweled watches for \$20-\$30. Some of the plastic bangles, she says, are Bakelite; some are celluloid. A friend once taught me a trick to tell if something is really Bakelite: Because the plastic is a mixture of phenol and formaldehyde, it should smell like formaldehyde if you rub it briskly with your fingers.



OLD FASHION
Browsing the racks at Cookies Cottage Antiques in the Lambertville open-air market turns up a vintage caftan, TOP, and retro-minded shoppers may find a great deal on a table of antique cameras, ABOVE.

has seven miles of antiques stores, markets and co-ops, but I bypass the strip on my next antiques-market outing and head for Shupp's Grove Antique Market, an open-air weekly market that is one of Pennsylvania's oldest (it opened in 1962). On average, the market has 250 dealers, and up to 500 on extravaganza weekends (which coincide with Kutztown's this year, including Sept. 23-25).

The vendors set up in the tree shade. On this fall afternoon, leaves mix with the merchandise on the creaky wooden tables. On a regular weekend, Shupp's Grove is much more manageable than the Renningers Market

extravaganza, but there also is a little bit less to love. An item that was plentiful at both markets was the decorative five-point stars that are fashioned from salvaged tin roofing. A vendor at Shupp's Grove tells me these stars are a Mennonite craft; they run \$35-\$250, depending on the size. I also see mirrors made from salvaged decorative tin ceiling tiles, and, later that week walking down Pine Street, I see the same mirrors for nearly double the price (\$160 compared to \$95).

A little closer to Philadelphia is the Golden Nugget Antique Market (which recently merged with the Lambertville Antique Market) on River Road (Rt. 29) in Lambertville. The markets are open year-round, every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, with indoor and outdoor vendors totaling around 300. Maybe it's because it's on a road that's traveled by many a wealthy antiques collector, but the prices here seem a little steeper, especially for furniture. The 1920s wooden medicine cabinets with ceramic or glass knobs that run \$40-\$50 in Adamstown and Kutztown are \$90-\$200 here.

Yet a vendor with carved wooden tables from India also is selling a cedar chest from Afghanistan, painted apple green on the inside and decorated on the outside with inlaid mosaic and mirrored chips, for \$225. Another dealer has a large wooden shipping crate with its original label from a New York port circa 1920. The destination—Old Wheel Inn, Philadelphia—is painted across its front in faded white paint. Cut a piece of glass for the top, and the \$35 chest would make a quirky coffee table—if you have the space for it. Personally, I don't. And I don't even have a van. So I content myself with petting the Chewbacca head that's being sold by a dealer who claims it was actually used in *Star Wars* (\$325), and buying a 1950s Betty Crocker cookbook to add to my collection instead. ■

Open Markets

**Golden Nugget
Antique Market**
1050 River Road (Rt. 29),
Lambertville, New Jersey;
609-397-0811.

The market is open
6 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesdays,
Saturdays and Sundays
year-round. For more
information, visit
www.gnmarket.com.

Renningers Market
740 Noble St., Kutztown,
610-683-6848.

The antiques market is open
8 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays
year-round; outdoor
antiques and flea markets
are open 7 a.m.-2 p.m.
Saturdays through Novem-
ber. For information about
extravaganza weekends
(remaining dates for 2004
are Sept. 23-25), visit
www.renningers.com

Renningers Market
Rt. 272, Adamstown,
717-336-2177.

The indoor antiques market
is open 7:30 a.m.-4 p.m.
Sundays year-round; the
outdoor flea market is open
5 a.m.-4 p.m. through
November. For information
about Special Sundays
(free admission), visit
www.renningers.com.

**Shupp's Grove
Antique Market**
Rt. 897 South, Adamstown,
717-484-4115.

The market is open
7 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays
and Sundays through
Oct. 31. For information
on extravaganzas and
theme weekends, visit
www.shuppsgrove.com.